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TAGS: TBIO PREL PGOV QVIP SOCI IZ

SUBJECT: SECRETARY LEAVITT PRESSES PM MALIKI FOR QUICK
PASSAGE OF SOFA

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b, c).

Summary

¶1. (C) In their October 20 meeting in Baghdad, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Michael Leavitt and Iraq Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki agreed on the importance of continued U.S.-Iraq health cooperation in "solidifying" the two countries' partnership. Encouraging quick passage of the SOFA, Secretary Leavitt noted the United States is entering a "fragile period" after the November election, when politics can be "unpredictable." While heartily agreeing that an agreement is in the interests of all countries in the region, PM Maliki noted that "complexities have appeared recently." The situation has become more difficult to predict, he said, and while he is "optimistic about an agreement," he said international cooperation is required to deal with these difficulties. End summary.

¶2. (U) Participant list:

Iraq:

- Nuri Al Maliki -- Prime Minister
- Dr. Salih Al Hassnawi -- Minister of Health
- Dr. Tariq Abdullah -- Prime Minister's Chief of Staff
- Prime Minister's interpreter

United States Embassy:

- Secretary Michael Leavitt -- Department of Health and Human Services
- Ambassador Ryan Crocker
- Richard McKeown -- HHS
- William Stieger -- HHS
- Dr. Terry Cline -- Health Attaché
- Roy Therrien -- ESTH Officer
- Dr. Galal El-Nahal -- Ambassador's interpreter

Health Services Cooperation: A "Bridge" Between East and West

¶3. (U) In their October 20 meeting in Baghdad, Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Michael Leavitt and Iraq Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki agreed on the importance of continued U.S.-Iraq health cooperation in "solidifying" the two countries' partnership. Citing Iraq's determination to overcome years of "international isolation" under Saddam, PM Maliki said Iraq is particularly looking to the United States as the world leader in healthcare. Saddam made no capital investments in Iraq's healthcare system since 1985, he said, which has left their infrastructure to crumble, and once-proud complexes like Medical City are now "past their expiration date." Secretary Leavitt complemented Minister of Health Salih's "excellent bedside manner" with the healthcare community in Iraq and lauded his energy and determination to reestablish Iraq as a regional leader in health. PM Maliki said the recent stabilization of the security situation has

allowed his government to turn its attention to the improvement of services in a number of sectors, including health, and he thanked the Secretary for his assistance.

¶14. (U) Secretary Leavitt called next month's Iraq-funded program that will bring 30 Iraqi doctors to the United States to share best-practices experiences with U.S. healthcare professionals, "just the beginning." PM Maliki agreed, calling such healthcare cooperation "the ultimate success" of the U.S.-Iraq partnership, because it brings together people, not just governments, with a true desire to work with each other. "These bonds will help build bridges between the East and the West, based on love and appreciation," he said.

¶15. (U) PM Maliki expressed "great confidence in the abilities of Iraqi physicians," but acknowledged they need to update their skills after so many years of isolation. The Secretary emphasized the American people feel a real partnership with Iraq, as evidenced by the overwhelmingly positive reaction when he asked U.S. associations of doctors and hospitals if they were interested in establishing ties with counterparts in Iraq. The commitment of the United States to help "is in the hearts of our people," he said, and indicated the long-term goal of U.S.-Iraqi cooperation in health should be to restore Iraq's traditional prominence as a regional leader in the sector. The Prime Minister agreed that "cooperation in health would be one of the best symbols of peace and friendship between our two nations."

"Complexities Appeared" Which Complicate SOFA Passage

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¶16. (C) Secretary Leavitt, encouraging quick passage of the SOFA, noted the United States is entering a "fragile period" after the November election, when politics can be "unpredictable." With both political and logistical challenges involved in the transition between administrations, "the process can become very slow and tentative," he said. Secretary Leavitt cautioned that new personnel, sometimes with little feel for the history and background of an issue, could be less willing to decisively engage this critical issue. "It is in no one's interest to not have a completed agreement," he emphasized.

¶17. (C) PM Maliki, while heartily agreeing that an agreement is in the interests of all countries in the region, noted that "complexities have appeared recently." The situation has become more difficult to predict, he said, "since fluctuations in the energy market have confused things and made it more difficult to plan." While he is "optimistic about an agreement," he said international cooperation is required to deal with these difficulties. "When freedom and democracy arrive suddenly, those who benefit sometimes can abuse those freedoms until they have had time to learn how to use them," he said. "But we would rather suffer a century of such problems rather than a single year of oppression or dictatorship."

¶18. (C) Ambassador Crocker, noting the importance of health cooperation in the Strategic Framework agreement and making specific mention of HHS, also emphasized the role of economic, security, and education cooperation. "This is an agreement between peoples, not just governments," said Ambassador Crocker. "And for us, it is the most important agreement," added PM Maliki.

¶19. (U) The HHS delegation has cleared this cable.
CROCKER